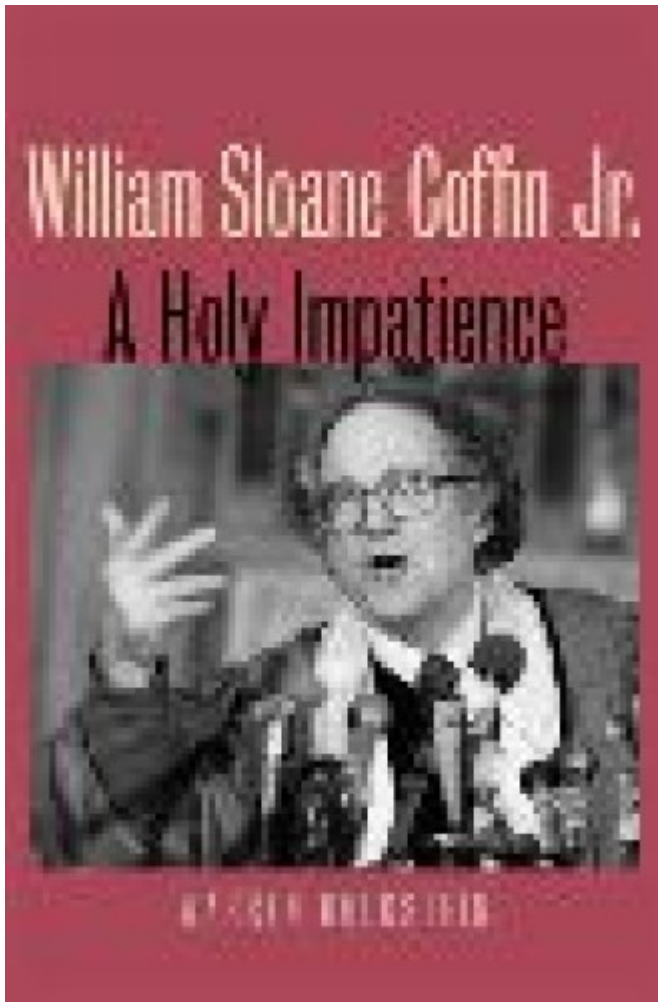


Out in front

By [Harvey Cox](#) in the [June 29, 2004](#) issue

In Review



William Sloane Coffin Jr.: A Holy Impatience

Warren Goldstein
Yale University Press

A good biography, expertly researched and finely crafted, conveys not just the trajectory of someone's life but also a feeling for the era in which the person lived.

This superb telling of the “still far from finished” life of William Sloane Coffin is just such an accomplishment.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once mused that a man must be involved in the action and passion of his times or else be judged not fully to have lived. If this is true, then Coffin lived more intensely than most of us. It is hard to think of a 20th-century churchman other than Martin Luther King Jr. who was more centrally and visibly involved in the tumultuous years of the civil rights movement and the antiwar movement. Coffin not only lived those events but made some of them happen, and he inspired hundreds of young people to become involved and thus to live fully as well.

Coffin and I have been friends for (can it really be?) nearly 50 years. We first met when we were both students at Yale Divinity School in the mid-1950s. We got there, however, along quite different paths.

Coffin, who is a few years older than I, arrived after a swashbuckling early career in the Office of Strategic Services and the CIA. A sophisticated New Yorker from a prominent Manhattan family, he had studied piano in Paris, played guitar with gusto and loved to belt out Red Army songs in Russian. He stemmed from an impressive lineage of theologians and church leaders. He roared around New Haven on a BMW motorcycle and lived off campus. His fieldwork assignment was at Yale’s Battell Chapel. He was easily the most visible member of our student body.

I, on the other hand, grew up in a sleepy Pennsylvania town and arrived at YDS directly from Penn State. There were no scholars or preachers anywhere in my genealogy. My overseas adventures were restricted to two summers of feeding horses and shoveling manure on relief ships to Poland and Belgium just after World War II. I lived on the YDS campus and borrowed my roommate’s wheezing Studebaker to drive to my fieldwork in a struggling blue-collar congregation in North Haven. Still, Coffin and I took some of the same courses, including a memorable seminar on theology and literature taught by Julian Hartt, from which I still remember a spirited discussion about Albert Camus’s *The Plague*, which Coffin, of course, had read in French.

After graduation we both chose campus ministry, Coffin first at Williams and then, for two decades, at Yale. I started at Temple University and then went to Oberlin College. We saw little of each other until the civil rights movement erupted during

the 1960s. Coffin's unswerving moral resolve and personal daring set the tone for countless ministers, priests and rabbis, including me.

In reading about that period in Goldstein's book, however, I began to feel a bit like a GI grunt who had landed on Normandy or frozen his toes in the Battle of the Bulge but only later learned what was really going on. I was definitely a foot soldier, albeit one who paid his dues in a southern jail. Coffin, on the other hand, was always either in charge or leading the charge. When I, along with a group of fellow clergy from Boston, was arrested, only the *Boston Globe* and the other local papers noticed. Whenever Coffin was arrested (which happened a lot) it was reported in the *New York Times*, and he was interviewed on network TV.

Goldstein writes candidly about how Coffin liked to be in the forefront rather than in the ranks. But though his celebrity aura could have caused resentment, it never did. Coffin earned his prominence. He took risks many of us were not yet ready to take. He not only enjoyed being a pop-culture figure, he used the role skillfully. Few public personalities could handle the interview format more adroitly. When he appeared on TV, he always said directly and eloquently what we who lacked his deft and winning way with words would have liked to be able to say.

Coffin first caught the public eye when he helped organize and then led the effort to desegregate the interstate bus system with what came to be called "Freedom Rides." This section of the book represents history as it should be written—with a sagacious use of sources, a strong narrative drive, and an authentic whiff of the charged atmosphere of the times. Then came the marches and demonstrations, including Selma and St. Augustine, in which I also participated, but was usually hidden by the crowd in the many pictures taken of the events. Not Coffin. Again he was up front, exposing himself to both the danger and the cameras, and when the interviews started, acting as our eloquent tribune.

About the movement to end the war in Vietnam, Coffin at first hesitated. As Goldstein shows, he was not sure that this issue posed the same kind of clear moral choice that racism and segregation did. Also, he was on a first-name basis with many Washington leaders who supported the war (some of them Yalies like himself). That made things awkward—though it helped later when he became an antiwar leader and these people felt compelled to return his calls. Coffin's participation in the peace movement was characteristic of his style. First he agonized, but when he made his decision to oppose the war, he unstintingly poured all the power of his

personal example, boundless energy and silver tongue into the fight. He did this with the support, if not the agreement, of Kingman Brewster, the president of Yale, with whom he kept in close communication.

One of Coffin's best skills was that he could keep more people in the loop, communicating with all sides, than nearly anyone else I have ever known. He could speak with a distraught member of the Yale board, an enraged parent and a Black Panther leader all within the same hour and somehow manage to retain the trust of all of them. But he was not mainly a mediator; he was a partisan. His opposition to the war reached its public climax in his famous trial, along with several other defendants, for turning in draft cards at a worship service at Arlington Street Church in Boston. That trial dragged on, at great financial and emotional expense to Coffin and the others, until the charges were eventually dropped.

Goldstein's book is candid, indeed at times unsparing, in probing into Coffin's personal life. His father died in 1933 when he was nine, and he maintained an unusually close relationship with his mother, Catherine. Such a bond seems quite understandable for a person who loses one parent so early. But it piques Goldstein's sometimes overactive Freudian curiosity and at times pushes his investigation close to the quagmire of psycho-history.

Coffin's first two marriages come in for microscopic, almost clinical, analysis and post hoc speculation. This may be standard operating procedure for biographies nowadays, but the reader will occasionally wince (as I did) at disclosures that must have been painful for the principals to read. Was it really necessary, for example, to assert that Coffin had so internalized his mother's view of the women in his life that he had hardly any independent judgment about them? Interesting—as they say—if true. But how much does it help us to understand who Coffin is, and how he managed to cut the swathe he did for nearly three decades?

In 1977 Coffin left the Yale chaplaincy to become the pastor of Riverside Church in New York City. Under his leadership it became not just a powerful preaching station, but—with the indispensable help of Cora Weiss (who does not get enough credit in this book)—a buzzing center for the peace and nuclear disarmament movements. Meanwhile, Coffin was one of the most sought-after graduation and special-events speakers in the country, and he had a hard time saying no to such invitations. He seemed to be everywhere, often flying across the country, but just as he had always gotten back to Battell Chapel for Sunday services, so he was almost always back in

his pulpit at Riverside Church by the time the bells rang. As Goldstein correctly states, he was becoming—next to Martin Luther King Jr.—“the most influential liberal Protestant in America.”

But Coffin’s red-eye schedule took a toll on family life. In later years he regretted not having spent more time with his family, although Goldstein claims that the children never seemed to complain. In the early 1980s Coffin lived through horrendous losses. His mother died. Then, a short month later, in January 1983, his son Alex, with whom Coffin had an unusually close bond, was killed after his car skidded into Boston harbor during a storm. Engulfed by grief, the family gathered in Vermont, where Coffin’s brother Ned lived and where Coffin had been courting Randy Wilson, whom he later married. Randy reports that she had hoped Coffin would stay for a while, to absorb the pain. But he insisted he had to get back to New York, claiming that “the church needs me.”

That was, as she put it, “bullshit,” but she also knew what Coffin the preacher sensed—that the best way to deal with his grief was to write and deliver a sermon about it. He did. Titled simply “Alex’s Death,” it is the most requested of all his hundreds of sermons. Commenting later, he said that what had really infuriated him at this time was the well-meaning people who reassured him that what had happened to his son was “God’s will.” It was certainly not, he said. “My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break.” He also took comfort from some lines of Emily Dickinson: “By a departing light / we see acuter, quite, / than by a wick that stays.”

One wonders why Goldstein, who was a student at Yale during Coffin’s tenure as chaplain, seems to shortchange his long and productive pastorate at Riverside Church. A writer who began with an excellent book on baseball, Goldstein has captured the zestful image of Coffin as a popular cultural hero. But Coffin was first and foremost a churchman and a preacher, and one of the most important facets of his immense legacy is the impact he had on two generations of churches and churchpeople. At the very time when some observers contended that the “mainline churches” were stagnating while the more conservative ones were growing, the man who occupied the most visible Protestant pulpit in America showed, Sunday after Sunday, that the mainline had not become a sideline. In addition to Riverside’s large multiracial congregation, some of its pews were always filled by visiting church folk from around the country.

Coffin has never been one to sign on to new theological trends. His underlying perspective, mainly forged at Yale, was that of a broadly ecumenical Presbyterian. He added flesh to those bones during the Riverside years, and he demonstrated convincingly that this theology could be related to a host of social issues. But it always remained possible to think of him as “neo-orthodox,” an heir of Barth, Tillich and the Niebuhrs.

A few years ago when I was teaching a course on Protestant theology in the 20th century I invited Coffin to talk to the class so they could get a taste of what was once a sturdy theological movement. As the class discussion went on I became aware that Coffin’s theological posture, though the core of a robust political ethic, was not fully connecting with the new generation of theological students. It did not seem to them to allow much room for interfaith enrichment or enlargement.

Coffin’s main expansion in that direction arose, characteristically, from personal encounters and had more to do with solidarity than with metaphysics. It grew out of his deep fondness for Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, with whom he marched in demonstrations. His interest in Asian traditions was largely restricted to the Buddhist monks, like Thich Nhat Hanh, who made such an invaluable contribution to the peace movement. Coffin could spot authenticity (and phoniness) whatever vestment it wore, and he was eager to work with anyone who shared his burning vision of a—at least somewhat—better world.

Goldstein’s last chapter, “Flunking Retirement,” nicely sums up Coffin’s current situation. Two small strokes and a heart attack have slowed him down, but just a bit. He lives in Stafford, Vermont, in a rambling frame house next door to the village church. He is extremely happily married to Wilson, a warm and charming but no-nonsense Vermont Yankee. He walks with a cane. Due to his persevering efforts with a speech therapist, only a slight slur colors his inimitable New York accent. He speaks in public less frequently now, but follows the news carefully and counsels a range of young church leaders who still look to him for wisdom. He can always produce just the right aphorism or one-liner for any occasion.

And he is as swift on the pick-up as ever. Two years ago I bought some books at a local kiosk near my home. When I went to pay with my Visa card, the young sales clerk looked at my name and said, “It’s such an honor to meet you. I’ve admired you for years—when you were the chaplain at Yale and were leading the civil rights and antiwar movement.” Not wanting to embarrass him, I thanked him and left. But later

my conscience bothered me. Chagrined, I phoned Coffin and told him what had happened. "Don't worry about it, Harvey," he shot back, "I'd do the same for you."

He might, though I doubt that the occasion will ever arise. There is only one Bill Coffin. This biography comes very close to taking his measure, but it does not fully succeed. Coffin has too many dimensions for anyone to get them all right. Life is still larger than art—especially when it is fully lived within the action and passion of the time.